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Donald Stanley on Books

JFK Foreign Policy



Robert McNamara was "extraordinarily able . . . brilliantly efficient . . . But he was not a wise man." Dean Rusk was "acutely shy . . . overcautious . . . did not have a very firm grip on the ball." McGeorge Bundy was "as able a man as any in Washington." But President Kennedy was "the most extraordinary personality of them all."

Roger Hilsman's book, "To Move a Nation," is not primarily concerned with personalities. It is a study of foreign policy during the Kennedy Administration. But seldom if ever has this ponderous subject been so full of human passions, strengths, and weaknesses.

Given Hilsman's basic contentions, it would be impossible for him to discuss policy without discussing personalities and motives. The result is that he has turned the traditional tidiness and aridity of diplomacy into a story of heat, fears, confusions and a handful of glorious triumphs.

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HILSMAN was one of the New Frontier "action intellectuals" — a West Point graduate, scholar, war hero and guerrilla expert who served Kennedy first as head of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, then as Averell Harriman's successor as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

His jobs brought him close to Kennedy as a participant in foreign policy decisions. His physical and intellectual courage, however, made him a favored adviser to the President who insisted upon intelligent men speaking their minds. Now, as an invaluable footnote to those thousand days, Hilsman continues for the historical record the role he filled for JFK.

This is an important book. Not so much for its revelations of internal turmoil within the Kennedy Administration (although it is surely fascinating to find that McNamara's initial response to Russia's installation of missiles in Cuba was to discount them with a so-what attitude) as for its success in putting that turmoil in perspective and giving Americans a realistic picture of how coherent foreign policy is made.

It is made, Hilsman shows, by rationalizing rather than by logical decision. The executive branch of government itself is the arena of more contending views, values and aims than can be found in the traditional arena in which executive, legislative and judicial wings are pitted against one another.

Thus Hilsman discussed the role of the CIA as it affected policy under Kennedy. Traditionally, the CIA — as an agency of the executive branch — "should" accept its place as a simple adviser to high level decision-makers.

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BUT THE CIA is staffed by excellent people, it has access to vital information and powerful allies in Congress, and it has immense operating funds. Try to keep such an engine from attempting to shape policy.

Thus too the other departments, with Defense vying for the major role in shaping foreign policy. And with Kennedy trying to jab Rusk and State into more vigorous advocacy of political, rather than military, solutions to U.S. problems.

But was there a basic foreign policy, or was "policy" simply the result of pragmatic daily decisions? I'll say more about this excellent book on Wednesday.

TO MOVE A NATION. By Roger Hilsman. Doubleday; 602 pages; \$6.95.